

Irving Kristol

Irving Kristol (January 22, 1920 – September 18, 2009) was an American columnist, journalist, and writer who was dubbed the “godfather of neo-conservatism.”^[1] As the founder, editor, and contributor to various magazines, he played an influential role in the intellectual and political culture of the last half-century;^[2] after his death he was described by *The Daily Telegraph* as being “perhaps the most consequential public intellectual of the latter half of the 20th century.”^[3]

1 Background



Kristol as a senior in high school, 1936.

Kristol was born in Brooklyn, New York, the son of non-observant Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, Bessie (Mailman) and Joseph Kristol.^{[4][5][6]} He received his B.A. from the City College of New York in 1940, which was free to attend until the 1970s, where he majored in history and was part of a small but vocal

Trotskyist anti-Soviet group who eventually became the New York Intellectuals. It was at these meetings that Kristol met Gertrude Himmelfarb, whom he later married in 1942.^[7] During World War II, he served in Europe in the 12th Armored Division as a combat infantryman.^[8]

Kristol was affiliated with the Congress for Cultural Freedom; he wrote in *Commentary* magazine from 1947 to 1952, under the editor Elliot Cohen (not to be confused with Elliot A. Cohen the writer of today’s magazine); co-founder (with Stephen Spender) of the British-based *Encounter* from 1953 to 1958; editor of *The Reporter* from 1959 to 1960; executive vice-president of the publishing house Basic Books from 1961 to 1969; Henry Luce Professor of Urban Values at New York University from 1969 to 1987; and co-founder and co-editor (first with Daniel Bell and then Nathan Glazer) of *The Public Interest* from 1965 to 2002. He was the founder and publisher of *The National Interest* from 1985 to 2002. Following *Ramparts’* publication of information showing Central Intelligence Agency funding of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was widely reported elsewhere, Kristol left in the late 1960s and became affiliated with the American Enterprise Institute.^[9]

Kristol was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and a fellow emeritus at the American Enterprise Institute (having been an associate fellow from 1972, a senior fellow from 1977, and the John M. Olin Distinguished Fellow from 1988 to 1999). As a member of the board of contributors of the *Wall Street Journal*, he contributed a monthly column from 1972 to 1997. He served on the Council of the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1972 to 1977.

In July 2002, he received from President George W. Bush the Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor.

Kristol married historian Gertrude Himmelfarb in 1942. They had two children, Elizabeth Nelson and William Kristol, the editor of *The Weekly Standard*.

Kristol died aged 89 on September 18, 2009 at the Capital Hospice in Falls Church, Virginia from complications of lung cancer.^[10]

2 Ideas

In 1973, Michael Harrington coined the term “neo-conservatism” to describe those liberal intellectuals and political philosophers who were disaffected with

the political and cultural attitudes dominating the Democratic Party and were moving toward a new form of conservatism.^[11] Intended by Harrington as a pejorative term, it was accepted by Kristol as an apt description of the ideas and policies exemplified by *The Public Interest*. Unlike liberals, for example, neo-conservatives rejected most of the Great Society programs sponsored by Lyndon Johnson; and unlike traditional conservatives, they supported the more limited welfare state instituted by Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

In February 1979, Kristol was featured on the cover of *Esquire*. The caption identified him as “the godfather of the most powerful new political force in America – Neo-conservatism”.^[12] That year also saw the publication of the book *The Neo-conservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics*. Like Harrington, the author, Peter Steinfels, was critical of neo-conservatism, but he was impressed by its growing political and intellectual influence. Kristol's response appeared under the title “Confessions of a True, Self-Confessed – Perhaps the Only – ‘Neo-conservative’”.^[13]

Neo-conservatism, Kristol maintains, is not an ideology but a “persuasion,” a way of thinking about politics rather than a compendium of principles and axioms.^[14] It is classical rather than romantic in temperament, and practical and anti-Utopian in policy. One of Kristol's most celebrated quips defines a neo-conservative as “a liberal who has been mugged by reality.” These concepts lie at the core of neo-conservative philosophy to this day.^[15]

That reality, for Kristol, is a complex one. While propounding the virtues of supply-side economics as the basis for the economic growth that is “a *sine qua non* for the survival of a modern democracy”, he also insists that any economic philosophy has to be enlarged by “political philosophy, moral philosophy, and even religious thought,” which were as much the *sine qua non* for a modern democracy.^[16]

One of his early books, *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, asserts that capitalism, or more precisely bourgeois capitalism, is worthy of two cheers: One cheer, because “it works, in a quite simple, material sense”, by improving the conditions of people. And a second cheer, because it is “congenial to a large measure of personal liberty”. These are no small achievements, he argues, and only capitalism has proved capable of providing them. But it also imposes a great “psychic burden” upon the individual and the social order as well. Because it does not meet the individual's “existential human needs”, it creates a “spiritual malaise” that threatens the legitimacy of that social order. As much as anything else, it is the withholding of that third cheer that is the distinctive mark of neo-conservatism, as Kristol understands it.^[17]

3 Articles

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- “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1967 (repr. in *On the Democratic Idea in America*).
- “Memoirs of a Cold Warrior,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 11, 1968 (repr. in *Reflections of a Neo-conservative*).
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- “Pornography, Obscenity, and Censorship,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 28, 1971 (repr. in *On the Democratic Idea in America* and *Reflections of a Neo-conservative*).
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- “The Hidden Cost of Regulation,” *The Wall Street Journal*.

4 Books

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- *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, 1978 (ISBN 0-465-08803-1)
- *Reflections of a Neo-conservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead*, 1983 (ISBN 0-465-06872-3)
- *Neo-conservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, 1995 (ISBN 0-02-874021-1)
- *The Neo-conservative Persuasion: Selected Essays, 1942-2009*, Basic Books, 2011 (ISBN 0465022235)
- *On Jews and Judaism*, Barnes and Noble, 2014.

5 References

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- [2] See, for example, “American Conservative Opinion Leaders,” by Mark J. Rozell and James F. Pontuso, 1990.
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- [5] Hoeveler, J. David, *Watch on the right: conservative intellectuals in the Reagan era* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), ISBN 978-0-299-12810-4, p. 81
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- [7] <http://contemporarythinkers.org/irving-kristol/biography/>
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- [10] “Irving Kristol, Architect of Neoconservatism, Dies at 89”. [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com). September 18, 2009. Retrieved 2010-10-14.
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- [17] *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York, 1978), pp. x–xii.
- On The Political Stupidity of the Jews, by Irving Kristol
- The Neoconservative Persuasion, by Irving Kristol
- Irving Kristol – Daily Telegraph obituary
- Appearances on C-SPAN
- Irving Kristol Papers – Wisconsin Historical Society
- *Booknotes* interview with Kristol on *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, September 24, 1995.
- Arguing the World, 1998 PBS documentary film featuring Nathan Glazer, Daniel Bell, Irving Howe, and Kristol

6 External links

- Website and bibliography of Irving Kristol’s writings
- American Conservatism 1945–1995, by Irving Kristol

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